

# EFFECTS OF THE CASCADE SPRINGS FIRE ON PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF WILDLAND FUELS TREATMENTS

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On Sept. 23, 2003, a prescribed burn to treat 600 acres of oak woodland near Cascade Springs on the Uinta National Forest went out of control, resulting in a 7,828-acre wildfire that sent smoke into the Salt Lake City-Provo area for a week. Coming at the end of a busy wildfire season in the fifth year of a prolonged drought, and affecting a rapidly growing metropolitan area where air quality is a major concern, the incident drew intense criticism from local government officials, news media, and the public. Further adverse publicity came when a Forest Service review team blamed fire officials for poor planning. As a result, some fire managers have wondered if public outcry will make it difficult to use prescribed fire to treat unnatural fuel loads in northern Utah for years to come.

To answer this question we initiated a study of public attitudes and knowledge regarding prescribed fire and other aspects of the wildland fuels issue in northern Utah, focusing on an assessment of the effects of the Cascade Springs incident. Surveys were mailed in November and December 2003 to randomly selected households in Salt Lake, Utah, and Wasatch counties. This summary report describes preliminary findings from this study.

Our efforts were aided by the fact that a national study of the social acceptability of fuels treatments in 2001 had included a survey of households in western portions of the Salt Lake metro area (see attachment). Although the geographic areas covered by the two surveys are not identical, by repeating some 2001 questions we could compare results of two public attitude surveys from the same metropolitan region before and immediately after the fire. In addition, we attempted to contact and re-survey Salt Lake County residents from the original 2001 survey. Responses were received from 268 citizens in the three counties, and 43 persons from the original study agreed to be re-surveyed. Generally the results show that citizens still believe prescribed fire should be part of the fuels reduction toolkit, but they are wary of its use near populated areas and have lost confidence in the ability of federal land managers to use it safely.

Overall, 82% of respondents supported use of prescribed fires, but only 31% agreed it is “a legitimate tool that resource managers should be able to use whenever they see fit.” In contrast, 80% supported use of mechanical fuels treatments including 42% who feel it can be used wherever managers believe it is appropriate. About twice as many people said prescribed fire should not be used in populated areas even if it means a higher risk of wildfires as said it should be used wherever needed to reduce fuel loads. Smoke, and its effect on public health, was the main cause of concern about prescribed fire. Scenic and recreation impacts were of low concern.

Virtually every respondent (96%) had heard of the Cascade Springs incident, and 70% said it changed their feelings about prescribed fire: 44% who feel more negative about its use, and 67% who feel more skeptical about fire managers’ ability to use it. Nonetheless, the Forest Service remains the fire management agency most trusted by the public to make good decisions about wildfires and fire prevention.

Comparisons of 2001 and 2003 survey results found no statistically significant difference in the overall acceptability of prescribed fire or mechanical treatment. What changed most notably are the levels of trust in public agencies, and the amount of concern about smoke. Citizens at the end of 2003 were less likely to express “full” trust in state and federal agencies and more likely to say they have “limited” trust. Numbers of people expressing “no” trust in the Forest Service and BLM also increased, although this group still constitutes less than 10% of respondents. Fully three-fourths of citizens now say they are concerned about smoke from prescribed fires (compared to a little more than half in 2001). When asked more specifically about smoke, 2003 respondents were less likely to say smoke is not an issue with them, that it’s a necessary inconvenience, and that it’s managed acceptably; they were more likely to say they’re concerned about its effect on public health.

Analysis of the 43 surveys from 2001 respondents found results similar to those of the larger study. For those whose trust level changed, virtually all change was in a negative direction. Concern about smoke changed most strongly, and respondents were more likely to say they would be worried if a fire broke out near their homes.

The most important finding from this portion of the study may be the number of responses that were different between 2001 and 2003. While percentages varied somewhat, questions typically drew different answers from 40-50% of respondents. This suggests that ideas about wildfire and fuels management are not strongly held, and can change easily in response to new information or to persuasive arguments for or against an issue.

Comparison of responses across counties found few differences between Salt Lake (N=114), Utah (N=62), and Wasatch (N=92) counties. Wasatch County residents were more likely than their urban counterparts to say the Cascade Springs incident made them skeptical about fire managers, and to express low levels of trust in the Forest Service and BLM. Wasatch County residents were also more concerned than other respondents about property damage due to an escaped prescribed burn.

In summary, it appears that the Cascade Springs incident did affect citizens’ attitudes toward the use of prescribed fire as a management tool, but that doesn’t mean it must be removed from the toolkit altogether. Citizens are likely to support prescribed fires in more remote locations where smoke is not likely to affect many people, even if it means a temporary loss of scenic quality or recreation opportunity. Trust, while negatively affected, remains high enough that prior levels can be restored with judicious use of fire over the next few years.